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Migration of identity of a counsellor educator: using writing as a method of inquiry to explore the in-between spaces

Shanee J. Barraclough^a

^a School of Health Sciences, College of Education, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

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Migration of identity of a counsellor educator: using writing as a method of inquiry to explore the in-between spaces

Shanee J. Barraclough*

School of Health Sciences, College of Education, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

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This paper examines the space between familiar and new storying of professional identity in the author's migration from counsellor/psychologist to lecturer/researcher. Value is given to reflecting on the complexities and multiplicities which exist in this in-between space, particularly at points of difference and discomfort. Reflective practices of writing as inquiry and autoethnography are used to examine this migration of professional identity and are suggested as useful processes for undertaking socially responsive research. In this context, writing as inquiry and subsequent meaning-making/deconstruction leads me to places not yet known, and gives per(form)ance to the complex and multiple possibilities that open up in this process. The benefit of autoethnographic writing and meaning-making as a pre-cursor to participant-observation research is also discussed.

Keywords: professional identity/subjectivity; narrative turn, counsellor education; writing as inquiry; reflective practice; autoethnography

Introduction

This paper forms a beginning, a re-entry into the written world of academia. It marks a moment, among other moments, in a transitional space between the per (form)ing of old and new identities. I hope that it will come to represent a moment of arriving, a merging or an integration, which foreshadows a becoming. This space of transition, of occupying in-between or liminal spaces is not unfamiliar to me, as a mother and an academic, a psychologist and a counsellor, and someone who has lived in and between different countries. Therefore, perhaps it is not surprising that it is these very spaces, often described as 'betwixt and between' that have become a focus for my PhD research. 'I didn't belong to either professional community. I was in a liminal space – betwixt and between, probably where I had always been professionally, but never before so starkly' (Leitch, 2006, p. 358).

Being also immersed in the PhD journey, I am migrating in many ways from the known to the unknown. This metaphor of migration, which I have found useful, comes from the context of narrative therapy. Crocket (2004) suggested it conceptualises 'the work involved in learning new cultural practices and the practices of self those cultural practices offer, when people are making very significant changes in their lives' (p. 4). Crocket herself came to describe the experiences in her doctoral research, including 'the confusions of the unfamiliar in working to perform the

*Email: shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz

practices of a lesser known culture' as 'having produced a migration of professional identity' (p. 4).

The focus of my PhD research is on such a migration of professional identity, but for counsellors-in-training. I am interested in their lived and storied experience as they occupy the interstitial spaces of migration, moving through these in-between spaces to construct a new identity of 'counsellor'. The focus of this piece, however, forms the beginning of such explorations, with my self as subject, prior to research with participants. Its purpose is twofold: first, to present an alternative way of beginning-to-engage with an area of study, namely using autoethnography and practices of writing as inquiry as reflective practices to situate my experience and the meanings I attach to these within the early stages of my research; and second, to present these autoethnographic pieces and reflections on them as a research inquiry into these in-between spaces of a migration of professional identity.

The following sets out to first offer a context for the larger study of counsellors-in-training, a brief review of the methodologies of writing as inquiry and autoethnography, before presenting my own pieces of writing as inquiry into my own experiences of in-between spaces of transition.

Counsellors-in-training – storying one's professional identity

Winslade (2002) suggested that a primary task of counsellor education is to assist students to story a professional identity as 'counsellor', to come to a place of being able to articulate 'this is who I am as a counsellor and this is what I am trying to do in the world' (p. 35). Thus, counsellor education becomes a site for the storying of one's professional identity, each interaction an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing construction of a 'new self' as counsellor. Underpinned by the tradition of narrative therapy such constructions of self are conceptualised as always taking place in relational contexts. This is a social constructionist view of identity (Burr, 1995). For example, a professional self as counsellor is continually produced in conversations with clients, with peers, with supervisors, with academic staff. This reflexive storying also occurs through 'processes of reading, talking about the reading with others, and articulating a considered response in writing ... consistently seeking feedback from those who are consulting us, and shaping our work in response to this feedback' (Winslade, 2002, p. 35). Thus, a professional self is produced both in these relational contexts and through the reflexive articulation of the professional practice produced through such contexts.

Such notions of self/identity as taken up by narrative therapy, (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1997; White & Epston, 1990) and narrative inquiry as a general field, and as adopted here, differ from more traditional conceptions of identity as a single, unified, coherent and relatively stable self (Smith & Sparks, 2008). Selves are viewed as multiple, as constituted through narrative and language, through time and through the social, political and historical contexts which they occupy. Smith and Sparks (2008) further described such scholars influenced by the narrative turn as located on a continuum 'with perspectives that adopt a "thick individual" and "thin social relational" emphasis on selves and identities at one end, and a "thin individual" and "thick social relational" focus at the other' (p. 7). I would suggest that identity as conceptualised in Narrative Therapy, and as used throughout this paper to explore the development of a professional self, is consistent with Smith and Sparkes' 'thick social relational focus' or performative perspective, that is, selves

and identities as ‘inseparable from, and moored in, the social’ (p. 24). What this also means within the context of Narrative therapy, deriving from the work of Michel Foucault, is that the possibilities to story one’s (professional) identity occur within existing discourses/structures of power or dominant social practices. Put simply here, our possibilities for constituting ourselves always exist within the social, historical and political contexts we are subjected to, and the power relations which flow amongst such relational contexts (Monk et al., 1997). Identities within this scholarly context are often referred to as *subjectivities*, or subject positions, reflecting the notion that the identities we create are not all of our own making but are ‘the products of social interactions that are themselves practices of power relations’¹ (Monk et al., 1997, p. 39).

In addition to this professional self, some researchers (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003) suggest that, distinctively, counsellors must also develop a ‘therapeutic self that consists of a unique personal blend of the developed professional and personal selves’ (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 507). Given such complexities of identity formation for counsellors and the relative newness of counselling as a profession, it is perhaps not surprising that researchers continue to ‘struggle to grasp the complexities and processes involved in the development of new counsellors’ (Grafanaki, 2010, p. 81). Given that counsellors’ professional identities are also produced in relation to the constructed identity of the larger counselling profession as a whole, it would seem to add to the complexity of this process further by the claim that the counselling profession ‘has long struggled to establish a cohesive professional identity for counsellors’ making it difficult for counsellors to ‘articulate a clear professional identity’ (Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011, p. 140). The limited research exploring the lived experience of counsellors-in-training also details the difficulty they have in defining and clarifying a counselling identity’ (Auxier et al., 2003).

Lived experience of counsellors-in-training

Laurel Richardson (1997) usefully described lived experience as ‘that which is known through the five senses’ (p. 66). Lived experience in this sense describes a position which assumes all we can ever know or speak of is our own experience of the world, rather than any objective reality. It is then from such places of knowing that we interpret and attribute meaning to this lived experience, thus stories or narratives are told (Epston & White, 1994).

What the research can tell us about the lived experiences and stories told of counsellors-in-training is limited, albeit important. Personal narrative, as someone who has been through the training, and is currently involved in training others as a counsellor educator, suggests this can be a fraught time. Limited research in the area is consistent with this idea. For example, the research of Auxier et al. (2003) reported on interviews and focus groups with eight master’s students enrolled in a counsellor education programme. They included students’ words such as ‘broken down’, ‘disoriented’, ‘almost devastating’, ‘emotional roller-coaster’, ‘fear-producing’, ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘confusing’ in describing moments of the students’ lived experiences (pp. 32–33). Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003) conceptualised the experience of counsellors-in-training as an arduous ‘novice journey’, saying ‘the struggles and stressors of professional work often combine to form a sense of bewilderment and confusion for the novice’ (p. 54). Although referring to novice teachers’ transitions into student teaching, Ronfeldt and Grossman (2008) described similar

findings, with reports of students ‘plagued by disillusionment, failure, loneliness, and insecurity’ (p. 41). They suggested that entering any new area of professional practice can be fraught with difficulty.

Method

As noted above, whilst the larger piece of research I am engaged in is exploring the lived experience of counsellors-in-training in constructing a counsellor identity, my intention in this paper is to focus on moments of my own lived experience through my own migration of professional identity. My impetus for doing this is consistent with ontological positions outlined thus far in this paper, namely feminist and post-structural notions of knowing, power and authority (Richardson, 1997). I can only come to know something about the experience of my research participants in relation to them, not as an objective observer of them. Thus, part of this knowing will be informed by my own lived experience, and the subsequent stories I tell about this. It is therefore useful, as a starting point, to make visible, and potentially deconstruct possible narratives I have about my own experience of coming to construct an alternative professional identity, and to consider ways in which my own professional identity is produced and performed (Monk et al., 1997). In doing so, it is my aim that this will then open up a wider range of possibilities or positions (Drewery, 2005) from which I can understand and engage with my research participants and the knowledge which will be produced in this research context.

My guiding research question was: *How do I describe and understand significant felt moments of my lived experience as I experience a migration of professional identity?* As will be outlined below, the ways in which I explored this question were through practices of writing as inquiry. I used my, already regular, practice of (journal and poetic) writing to include significant moments of lived experience over a six-month period during my first year as a lecturer on a counsellor education programme. This method of writing about significant moments draws on both critical incident methods used in counselling research (e.g. Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Lee, Eppler, Kendal, & Latty, 2001) and collective biography, the methodology to be used with my own research participants (Davies, 2009; Davies & Gannon, 2006, 2011).

Critical incidents are described as ‘significant learning moments, turning points, or moments of realization that were identified by the trainees as making a significant contribution to their professional growth’ (Howard et al., 2006, p. 88), with participants often using journals to record these. Central to the method of collective biography is a focus on remembered moments of experiences and encounters, which participants work with, through the shared work of telling, writing (drawing), listening, re-writing, to re-member the deeply felt sensory, embodied detail of those lived experiences (Davies & Gannon, 2006). Whilst doing this as auto- rather than collective- biography, my intention in writing was nevertheless the same: to write the deeply and often acutely *felt* moments of my lived experience.

Writing – form and content are inseparable

Central to this paper and my methodology, and indeed to the ways I make sense in and of the world, and of my self in it, are practices of writing. The particular research practices which have come to inform my writing, presented below, include

writing as inquiry (Richardson, 1994), autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, 2006) and ‘poetries’ (Brogden, 2010).

I consider writing as a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a mode of “telling” about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of “knowing” – a method of discovery and analysis’. (Richardson, 1994, p. 516)

Since Laurel Richardson first offered this idea of writing as a method of inquiry, qualitative researchers in a variety of disciplines have shown it to be a viable way in which to learn about themselves and their topic (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). In this way, writing *is* thinking, discovering and analysing, and what emerges or is constructed in the writing is not known before the writer lifts the pen to the page (or fingers to the keyboard). Our aim in writing is that it ‘will lead us somewhere, (s)omewhere we do not yet know’ (Gale & Wyatt, 2007, p. 792). By writing in this way, Richardson (1994) suggested our aim is to discover new aspects, dimensions or relationships to our topic. In this way, it is suggested that form and content are inseparable.

Such methods of writing are underpinned by postmodern, or more particularly, post-structural ways of thinking and theorising, wherein the words we write do not reflect, capture or constitute an external social reality, but rather they are used to construct an individual’s subjective reality. Language is thus said to produce or create meaning at that point in time (Richardson, 1994). Therefore, writing as a method of inquiry is used as a way of making meaning from the complex and multiple possibilities which exist for individuals as they navigate their social worlds. These constructions of meaning, coming to know the self, or selves, in the social world, become partial, historical and local knowledges, they reflect one way (of many) of knowing about our selves in the world, at any point in time. For these reasons, Richardson suggested it becomes imperative that we reflect on our methodologies and explore new ways of knowing. Writing as a method of inquiry, and in this paper, ‘poetries’ as a method of inquiry offer one such way.

Whose story is being told?

Along with this postmodern turn has come the recognition that writing about the ‘other’ is necessarily entwined and entangled with the ‘self’ and that this has typically been obscured in modernist texts, with researcher distance, objectivity and privilege portrayed as truths, which come to produce ‘master narratives (which) seek to preserve the social order’ (Fine, 1994, p. 73). The postmodern alternative has been a move towards researcher reflexivity, towards including the researcher’s voice as no longer separate and neutral, but as impacting on and a powerful participant in the co-construction of meaning and research findings. ‘As researchers we need to position ourselves as no longer transparent, but as classed, gendered, raced and sexual subjects who construct our own locations, narrate these locations, and negotiate our stances with relations of domination’ (Fine, 1994, p. 76).

Autoethnography is one way of writing the self into the text in both a reflexive and evocative way. Ellis and Bochner (1996, 2006), major proponents of autoethnography, described a core assumption of the method being that

‘ethnographers cannot stand above and outside what they study’ (1996, p. 19), consistent with post-structural notions described above. They similarly suggested that through this method, rather than leaving ourselves at the margins, we make ourselves personally accountable. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research in which the writer portrays a continual movement between inward looking, exposing a vulnerable self and outward gazing ‘through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience’ (Ellis, 1999, p. 673). Its goal is not so much to portray ‘facts’ of experience but rather to convey ‘meanings’ which the author attaches to their experience, with the ultimate aim of inviting the reader to enter into and to ‘feel and think about your life and their lives in relation to yours’ (Ellis, 1999 p. 674).

‘Poetries’

In this paper the term given to the form of autoethnographic writing I have used is borrowed from Brogden (2010) who has used ‘poetries’ to refer to pieces of poetry; poems collectively’ (p. 373). She chose this term and accompanying definition as ‘a way to diffuse critique, a way to say, “please tread lightly” to the literary crowd’ (p. 373); my request also. One aim in presenting my ‘poetries’ also aligns with Brogden’s ‘attempt to draw the reader into some of the obvious – and less obvious – moments of life as lived ...’ (p. 373). Brogden has referred to life as lived with/in and outside academia, and while this is perhaps part of the lived experience I refer to, I am more interested in portraying moments of a life lived in the in-between spaces, moments explored in the spaces of transition.

Choosing ‘poetries’ as a method of inquiry, and as a way of presenting ‘findings’ to the reader lends itself to much more than this as well. Poetry not only tells a story of a lived experience – it is a lived experience in and of itself, and as such invites the reader to experience and interact with the text, in a way that ‘telling about’ does not. ‘A poet also grapples directly with the writing experience itself, acknowledging explicitly that experience can never be perfectly captured, but that a poem in itself is another experience’ (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 14). Similarly, David Whyte, poet, has suggested that ‘Poetry ... is not *about* a subject, not *about* a quality, or an experience, it is the experience itself’ (Whyte, 2012). Thus the reader is invited into their own ‘lived, felt, experience’ (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765) in response to the text.

Why is this important in academic writing? Recent writers and qualitative researchers suggest that these types of writing, autoethnographic texts, are about making the personal political. Holman Jones (2005) has written about how ‘a personal text can move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into this space of dialogue, debate and change’ (p. 764). The power of poetry in particular invites the reader into a different type of dialogue with the text. Poetry leaves things out, is ambiguous, metaphorical and as such creates a space between the writer and the reader, for something else, potentially unknown previously, to emerge. Poetry can reflect the complexity and multiplicity of our social worlds, in any given moment, without offering answers or making conclusions and as such can ‘open the text to interpretation and destabilize the “coherent” narrative ...’ (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 9). Ellis concurred, suggesting that poetry ‘leaves the meaning open, which is our goal in narrative research’ (2004, p. 203).

Ellis (2004) talked further about the use of the poetic form in autoethnographic texts, suggesting the potential for poems to resonate in the body and to move people both emotionally and intellectually is a powerful way to learn. She highlighted, as did Holman Jones (2005), the political power of poetry as a form of representation in research. 'Alternative discourses, such as poetry, challenge canonical social science discourse, and they have the power to transform us personally, open up our research practices, as well as teach us about injustice, encouraging us to join in the struggle' (Ellis, 2004, p. 204).

In re-presenting my own writing, of my moments of lived experience in transition, I offer them both as evocative and personal inquiries, as well as reflexive and situated pieces looking outward to the experience of others. In this instance the others I am looking toward are those whom I hope will be participants in my research, who are as yet nameless, but who I hold in my pen and my mind as I shift between my inward and vulnerable gaze to thoughts of an 'other'. I do this continual recycling in an attempt, as Fine (1994) said, at working the hyphen between self and other, to 'probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants' (p. 72). I offer here a different way, an additional way of doing this, by using writing as a method of inquiry to examine my own experience, interest, meanings and curiosity before I have even begun to engage with participants. In this way, I hope to bring a greater depth to both my inquiry and methodology with participants, as well as to clearly situate myself in this research and with my (eventual) participants from the outset.

Making meaning

To that end, what follows is structured to centre (three) pieces of 'writing as inquiry' as autoethnographic text which attempt to 'show struggle, passion, embodied life and the collaborative creation of sense-making' (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433) and to 'feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection' (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). These were chosen from other pieces of writing completed over the six-month period, simply to tell part of the story. Equally, other pieces could have been presented here.

Whilst the 'poetries' alone offer the reader a story of moments of my lived experience of migration of a professional identity, the pieces of writing are followed by further meaning making, in order to connect my experience to 'a world beyond the self' (Ellis, 2004, p. 34). Each piece of writing was re-read several times and attempts to analyse them were informed by deconstruction practices of narrative therapy (Monk et al., 1997) and collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006). Such practices include the 'process of listening for what is not said', and of looking for 'hidden meanings, spaces, or gaps, and evidence of conflicting stories' (Monk et al., 1997, p. 43). It was my aim that by turning a reflexive gaze upon the discursive practices at work in my habituated ways of being, making them both visible and revisable, (Davies & Gannon, 2006) I could then begin to open up possibilities for other ways of knowing and ultimately becoming.

Further questions and curiosities were then constructed in relation to my aim of connecting my lived experience and theorising to the further study of the lived experience of counsellors-in-training – these questions are presented in boxes.

‘Poetries’**Doubt**

Today, the gap is wide
 I flick between your words,
 associate professor,
 on the page
 and the apps on my iPad,
 ‘Dictionary’ and ‘Wikipedia’.
 I am
 lost
 in
 translation.
 Excitement
 ‘your abstract has been accepted’
 now tempered with
 fear
 the abstract
 was the best bit.
 Models of perfection
 are viewed
 from a great distance.
 How can I
 traverse
 this crossing
 with only
 the clothes on my back,
 and my offspring
 in tow?

As has been discussed above, the turn to narrative has led to the understanding that ‘our lives are storied and identity is narratively constructed’ (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 6). Narrative therapists are interested in knowing about the meanings people have constructed about themselves, or the dominant stories they tell, on the basis of their lived experience in the world. Re-reading this piece through such a narrative lens I find myself curious about the stories I am telling, the meaning I am making, of my own lived experience.

First, in contrast to the post-structural theoretical positioning espoused throughout this paper, it seems clear that the dominant story speaks of ‘deeply felt and specifically liberal-humanist desires to be taken up (by others and (myself)) as unique and individual’ (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 172). The ‘I’ doing the work of reading, judging the distance between my own current output and that of ‘perfection’ as ‘great’, viewing it as a traverse to be crossed, like a solitary journey to be taken in one direction only. These all speak of the rational, liberal-humanist will, of autonomous, ‘solitary and heroic’ (p. 176) narratives, and of the ultimate desire of ‘accomplishment of (my)self as competent subject’ (p. 176). However, this accomplishment of myself as an appropriate and competent academic, seen through my momentary ‘excitement’ is only, and always, provisional. Through a post-structural/narrative

therapy lens though, there are gaps in this tale. The possibility of myself becoming competent *only* as an autonomous subject, through will, reason and hard work alone denies the complexity of the social and cultural relational contexts within and through which I am constituted, and of my dependence on the power of others to name me as competent, as appropriate, or not. By deconstructing such discourses at play in the narratives I construct, I can then begin to see in other ways, to perhaps give up the notion of a solitary, autonomous, linear journey from here to (unattainable?) competence. Instead, I begin to envisage this process of transformation, not so much 'the result of a rational choice to be someone or something else in particular' (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 171) but as engagement in a messy, complex, non-linear process where I am always in relation, always both constituted by the other and constituting myself as a (in)competent academic subject.

I am also aware that I could not finish this piece without including a reference to my children. However, 'offspring in tow' is how this appeared, almost an add-on, a lagging behind, certainly not front and centre. This is perhaps illustrative of findings from other research which suggests that women academics with children often feel a need to disconnect from their mothering role and responsibilities while engaged in academic work (Raddon, 2002). It has been useful to take this idea further however, and to think about this combination of mothering and academic as two subject positions I take up, not as fixed, unchanging identities, but as ever fluid and in process, and always in relation. One does not disappear when the other is foregrounded, and these are only two of the multiple subject positions I am constantly in relation with (e.g. also perhaps psychologist, counsellor, daughter, partner). Monk et al. (1997) suggested that 'each of these positions brings with it a variety of expectations about how the person relates to certain other people in socially organised interactions', (p. 38) and that these expectations and circulating power relations can cause potential tension and conflict. For example, other research has noted a 'tension between what is constructed as the independent, aggressive nature of academic work and the dependent, caring nature of mothering' (Raddon, 2002, p. 387). However, rather than simply feeling powerless in the face of *either* the academic *or* mother binary, new possibilities emerge in taking up a position of always being *both* academic *and* mother, and in viewing these as in constant change, flow and even contradiction. In doing so a reflexive awareness of the multiplicity of positions and possibilities available is developed. At the same time, recognising such identities and subjectivities as not being fixed within individuals opens up the possibility for meanings, for example, of successful academic or good mother, to be reworked (Raddon, 2002). These very beginnings of deconstruction open up possibilities of my not just being constituted by the dominant discourses of the mother/academic subject positions, but of beginning to choose, to take agency for, the work of constituting myself.

These ideas lead me to wonder about the stories of my future counselling-trainee participants.

Curiosities

- How do counsellors-in-training tell stories of their process of transformation? Are they, too, solitary, autonomous subjects viewing models of perfection from great distances?

- What other subjectivities will they have 'in tow'?
- What competing discourses will they be struggling within/against and how will they be positioning themselves within these?
- Where are the sites of tension and struggle?

'Multiphrenia' – two pieces
Beyond the edges

Exposed, laid bare
by a process,
a blunt instrument
so says a colleague

*I think
she is very good
at explaining things and
also very open to questions,
taking time to answer them
well.*

We strongly agree.

This is my intent
yet the words barely
register

*I disagree, says one,
I would have appreciated
much clearer delivery
of key concepts.*

is all I see
and hear.

*She taught in a way that
challenged me intellectually
agree seven, some
strongly. I
disagree.*

I wonder,
where do I begin
and end? Where am I,
in this space
between
my selves
and theirs?

*sometimes I felt
too challenged.*

Far
too
airy
fairy
 or
 a
fantastic
lecturer
 or
 ?

Out in this world

Multiple voices perform
 out of tune
 Their noise is painful
 to her ears
 and heart
 Skin, too thin
 to shield her
 from arrows
 The space between
 this self
 and the one they perceive
 her to be,
 feels
 v a s t a n d w i d e
 The space between
 this self
 and the one she hoped
 to be,
 feels
 v a s t a n d w i d e
 She seeks only retreat
 and trusts that
 wisdom, and compassion
 will arise
 in the emptiness
 of this space.

How do I find myself between the spaces, at the edges, of their text and mine? I wonder how I can construct myself, when I am continually constructed differently by others, in this case my students? These ‘multiple voices’ seem to fit well with Kenneth Gergen’s (1991) term ‘multiphrenia’, defined as ‘a symptom of the increasing multilocality, plurality, and intertextuality of the postmodern era – the unending embeddedness of our own stories within those that seem also to belong to others’ (Rolling, 2004, p. 551).

In this example, the *other* consists not only of the students and their power to constitute my academic subjectivity, but also the organisational structure of teaching

surveys, and the power these hold to define and determine, to some extent, through anonymous voices, my competency as an academic subject.

As such, I am invited to take up an either/or position, to deny the validity of such surveys and determine my own competence, to resist the power manifest in such surveys. But to do so denies their power to accord me competent status as a teaching academic. Or, in the binary of either/or I can submit to their power and allow them, the student voices to tell the story of my competence. In these pieces, I am caught in this either/or, of the student voices as well. If I do not resist being subjected to the power of the teaching survey, then which voices within the survey do I become subjected to, caught in another binary of ‘a fantastic lecturer’ or ‘far too airy fairy’?

Alternatively, I can recognise the subjection of the gaze of others and of the structures of power constitutive of academic socialisation (Bochner, 1997), and resist being solely produced by the survey or by one or other of the student voices. Instead I can consider what it means to be both ‘fantastic’ and ‘airy fairy’ and probably somewhere in between; what it means to allow my academic self to be constituted by a teaching survey and to consider other ways I might also choose to constitute myself as a teacher. In this way, I can become a participant in the conversations that produce the narratives and meanings about my life, I can take up an ‘agentive position’ (Drewery, 2005, p. 314).

These ideas lead me to wonder about the people and processes producing the stories of my future counselling-trainee participants, and how they might also be positioned in relation to these.

Curiosities

- Who do counsellors-in-training experience as producing their counsellor identities? Who do they experience as having power to name their competence?
- What processes or structures (e.g. assessment) do counsellors-in-training experience as holding power to determine their competency and their identities?
- How do counsellors-in-training position themselves in relation to the above? How do they position themselves as a participant in the conversations that produce the narrative of their lives?

Conclusion

In contrast to previous longstanding beliefs in researcher objectivity in qualitative research, and to attempts to protect against researcher bias, Granek (2013), in taking up Fine’s (1994, p. 72) challenge to ‘work the hyphen’ has argued that ‘acknowledging this hyphen, or our essential interconnection with each other, is the epistemological cornerstone of socially responsible research’ (p. 179). It has been my intention in this paper to add to this research movement by also taking up Fine’s (1994, p. 72) original challenge to ‘probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study’. Whilst researchers have begun to study themselves and their relationships with their fields of study and their participants through methods such as reflexivity (Etherington, 2004) and autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, 2006), I offer here

an additional way of exploring this relationship with our fields of study. I argue that it is possible, not only to situate or position ourselves in relation to our research at the outset, but to probe this positioning and use it to engage deeply with our research endeavours.

I began to probe that relationship through the use of ‘poetries’ as a method of inquiry into my own lived experience, of migrating identities, with the intention of positioning my experience in relation to that of my soon-to-be-participants’ experience of their own migrating identities – to one of counsellor. However, what I discovered was that the real depth and richness of this exploration occurred by not simply accepting the first story I was telling about my lived experience (the poetries). Accepting this was simply to accept the dominant discourses around identity – the familiarity and comfort of the liberal-humanist discourse of the autonomous, coherent and relatively stable identity. My probing of the meanings I was making, and the stories I was telling through a post-structural lens yielded a richer exploration of my lived and storied experience. Using these findings to then pose ‘curiosities’, or questions to consider, in relation to my research participants has added a valuable dimension to my research. I hope this will be a fruitful method to develop, for others who wish to expand the growth of ‘socially responsive research’ (Granek, 2013, p. 179).

In undertaking this alternative method of researching self and other in our research contexts, interesting and useful findings for the area of counsellor education have also emerged. Whilst the findings are limited by there being only one research participant, and by that same participant analysing her own data (it may be useful in future studies of this type to have a second researcher co-research this type of data), it would still seem to provide some useful questions and considerations for the area of counsellor education research. This is particularly so, given as recently as 2010, researchers are suggesting the impact of training on counsellors remains a relatively new area of study, and that there is a growing interest in better understanding how counsellors develop during their training years and beyond (Grafanaki, 2010). Questions raised through this inquiry suggest it is worthwhile considering counsellor education through a narrative, post-structural lens. This means seeing a counsellor subjectivity/identity as one of multiple subject positions counsellors-in-training will be grappling with as they engage with the messy, non-linear and complex process of transformation. This also means querying the dominant liberal-humanist discourses in much professional education of autonomous, solitary individuals engaged in (un)attainable pursuits of far-off models of perfection. This is perhaps particularly so in the field of counselling where the performances of many ‘gurus’ are available for all to covet. Perhaps though, regardless of where one positions oneself on the individual-social relational continuum outlined by Smith and Sparkes (2008), narrative research into the transformational processes of storying a counsellor identity or subjectivity is a much needed addition to the field of counsellor education.

Note

1. For consistency, although I adopt the meaning of the term ‘subjectivities’ here, I will continue to use the term ‘identity’.

Notes on contributor

Shanee J. Barraclough currently teaches on the Master of Counselling programme in the School of Health Sciences, University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Her research interests are in the fields of counselling and counsellor professional identity, writing as reflective practice and inquiry, and post-modern therapies.

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